

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 9

CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR
26 September 1984

Bulgaria rebuts charges that it conspired to kill the Pope

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Special to The Christian Science Monitor

Sofia, Bulgaria

It is now late September, and the Italian judiciary still has not brought an indictment against the men accused of conspiring to assassinate Pope John Paul II.

This prolonged delay is seen here as tacit admission of basic flaws in the prosecution's case that Bulgaria's secret service conspired with Mehmet Ali Agca, the would-be assassin, to kill the Pope.

"We are, first of all, ideologically against terrorism and we had no reason to want the Pope killed," Boyan Traykov, head of the official Bulgarian Telegraph Agency, stated flatly during a three-hour review of the case.

Mr. Traykov, a veteran journalist, is a member of the Bulgarian Communist Party's Central Committee. Neither party nor government here has entered directly into the fray over the "plot."

"That," Traykov said, "would suggest we attach weight to the charges, that we are under pressure. Far from it — we know we have no case to answer."

Traykov is in effect the government's spokesman in the affair. Western diplomats here praise the skill with which he handles the role in press conferences, in statements issued through his agency, and in a series of articles analyzing the case in great detail.

The New York Times in June outlined the bizarre, labyrinthine story of the alleged "Bulgarian connection" as contained in a still-secret report by Italian state prosecutor Antonio Albano.

According to contents of the report leaked to the Times, the Bulgarian secret service, operating through three Bulgarians in Rome, was behind Agca's gun when he shot and wounded the Pope. It was implied that the Bulgarian intelligence agency was acting in collusion with the KGB, though the Soviet organization is not mentioned in the report.

"Every declaration of Agca's, every circumstance and detail, was checked and investigated," the Times quotes the report as saying.

Judge Ilario Martella, who will recommend whether the case should be brought to trial, is reported personally to have checked details of the report with trips to Turkey (Agca's homeland), Bulgaria, and

the United States. He had been expected to recommend in July whether the case against six Turks and three Bulgarians should go to trial.

Traykov scoffed at the Italian prosecutor's reported suggestion that the assassination attempt might have arisen from East-bloc fears of the consequences for Eastern Europe of the Solidarity trade union in Poland.

"Solidarity," said Traykov, "was not in existence in 1979 when, as the prosecutor's report claims, the 'plot' to kill the Pope was under preparation. Moreover, it is obvious to anyone that a successful attempt on his life could have had only the contrary, unintended effect of intensifying opposition to the Warsaw government."

According to the Times, the report in fact charges that Bulgaria began plotting to kill the Pope in July 1980. At the time of the shooting, Solidarity had not yet reached its peak and martial law was still seven months away.

In defending Bulgaria, Traykov also said he recalls a visit to the Vatican May 24 of this year of a Bulgarian cultural delegation marking a traditional commemoration of the revered Slav saints, Cyril and Methodius, who brought Christianity into Bulgaria. The group included a government minister who, Traykov said, was received by the Pope in the "intimacy" of his library.

"Would he receive an official Bulgarian delegation in this way if he thought our authorities were involved in a plot to kill him?" Traykov asked.

Agca shot and wounded the Pope in St.

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